

A NEW NEW DEAL?

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The same week that New York City Mayor Mike Bloomberg announced his plans to close eight city firehouses, Mike Wallace, John Jay College Professor and bard of New York, held a conference on “New York City and the New Deal” at the CUNY Graduate Center. Walking up through Herald Square on that rainy Friday morning in late November, I found that the desperate sparkle of 1930s New York seemed far away from the stagelike shop-window displays of Macy’s and H&M. Empire State Building—a monument to the jazzy bubble of the 1920s—loomed over the public space of the Graduate Center. A few years ago, Wallace (with co-author Edwin Burrows) published *Gotham*, a 1,000-plus-page tome on New York’s history to 1898. His new book, *A New Deal for New York*, is a diminutive 128 pages, but its subject is, if anything, more important. Wallace was inspired to write about the New Deal by his experience in New York City after 9/11, where he witnessed New Yorkers’ solidarity and compassion for one another in a moment of crisis. It seemed possible to him that the collapse of the twin towers could focus national attention on the longstanding political and economic difficulties. “By making chronic conditions acute,” Wallace writes, the bombing of the towers “helped galvanize the will to confront them.” Wallace hoped that disaster relief might go not only to the families of those who died in the towers but that it would spill over to relieve the daily disaster of poverty in New York. New homes could be built not only for those whose homes were lost; jobs could be created for people who don’t have them, not only those who once worked in lower Manhattan. The New Deal—which started as a response to another kind of Wall Street disaster—could serve as a model of public investment.

At the Graduate Center, historians, urban planners, politicians, city activists, social scientists and labor leaders met to imagine a new New York City. Representative Jerrold Nadler spoke, as did Bruce Raynor, the president of UNITE. Even Bill Clinton had hoped to attend (he didn’t, which seemed to sum up his rocky relationship with the New Deal). Held in the shadow of November’s conservative electoral victories, the policy proposals discussed at the conference—none of which are anywhere on the table—all had a polemical cast.

What would a new New Deal look like? For Wallace, the most important thing is that the New Deal’s creators viewed the alleviation of poverty as an economic good. Improving the lives of the poor and the working class, as they saw it, could make the whole economy grow. In that same spirit, Wallace envisions a massive public investment program that would revitalize the economy while making economic growth more equitable. He hopes for federal investment in affordable housing, high-speed rail, alternative energy sources and the Second Avenue subway. More generally, he wants a greater level of public involvement to preserve and nurture the delicate urban economy—a cocktail of such unlikely allies as Robert Moses, builder of New York’s highways, and Jane Jacobs, of Greenwich Village, who fought their construction. Federal investment in infrastructure would improve the city’s economy while employing people who badly need good jobs, at the same time boosting purchasing power. It is an economist’s New Deal: Wallace wants the federal government to “deploy its resources (that is, our tax dollars) to alleviate suffering and revitalize the economy.”

By these standards, the New Deal is quite a benchmark. By 1936, public works projects in New York City employed more than 246,000 people, who constructed hundreds of parks, municipal swimming pools, playgrounds and the Central Park Zoo—not to mention almost 400 new police and fire stations. New Deal agencies hired artists, writers and actors, viewing them as workers, not dilettantes. Dentists opened clinics in the city's schools. Out-of-work teachers founded the city's first public daycare centers. Thousands of workers in all kinds of occupations—garment workers and office workers alike—organized industrial unions. On a national scale, there were deep flaws in the New Deal, especially in its racial and gender politics. But, especially in New York City, the New Deal contained the promise of a Utopian vision of a society driven by human need and collective purpose instead of private wealth. "If all this could happen during the greatest economic crisis in the city's history," asked Wallace at the conference, "why the hell can't we make it happen now?"

While Wallace conveys the "range, sophistication and efficiency" of the New Deal programs, his technocrat's language and win/win Keynesianism seem unlikely to inspire the dramatic reshaping of the economy that he envisions. The first New Deal, after all, was won only after a century of struggle. As Nelson Lichtenstein suggested at the conference, the New Deal was more than public spending on highways and playgrounds. Rather, it bore witness to a vision of American society that would place labor and the well-being of working people at the center of the economy's productive power. "The New Deal," Frances Fox Piven said at one panel, "was a response to a political crisis, not just an economic one." Urban planners and New Deal Democrats did not make the New Deal alone. It was born of the men and women who sat down at Flint and streamed into industrial unions, who marched on Washington for sustenance and work. This near-revolution was fought bitterly in the 1930s by conservative businessmen, and its remnants are still under attack today—in every supply-side tax cut, every antiunion campaign.

No amount of warm enthusiasm could generate agreement at the Graduate Center about how to move forward. But there was consensus on one point: An egalitarian politics has yet to rise from the ruins of lower Manhattan. "There was always the politics of hope and fear, and the guys at the top are running with fear" says Wallace. Today, it seems clear that the primary effect of the war on terror has been to strengthen every conservative political force in American society. Instead of a program of public investment, we've gotten tax cuts and welfare cutbacks—not to mention a new federal agency free of unions, and the first invocation in a generation of the Taft-Hartley Act to stop a labor action. No politics that matters can hide beneath the sentimental unity of war. The Great Depression and the New Deal revealed deep conflicts in American society that had long been evaded and denied. At the Graduate Center, it was generally accepted that any similar politics today would do the same. No matter how remarkable the New Deal's practical accomplishments—the bridges its laborers built, the murals its artists painted, the histories its writers chronicled, the rural homes it lit up—the CUNY conference reminded attendants of its deeper political lesson: to keep faith in the struggle for a better world.

By KIM PHILLIPS-FEIN